

# Fourth of July Celebration

Duxbury Clipper

Wednesday, July 7, 2004

## ✓ July 4th Literally Ablaze in 1900

By TONY KELSO

Fourth of July 2004 has passed by without any spectacular events other than the usual festivities. This was not the case 104 years ago. July 4th 1900 in Duxbury began with several bonfires set by "celebrating vandals" that caused concern across the town. Both occurred late on the night of July 3. The first was the firing of the "Perry house," location unknown; it was unoccupied and burned to the ground.



The second torching of a building was a much better known landmark: the old mill and factory at Millbrook, which stood on Route 3A/Tremont

Street on the way to Marshfield. The building lay on the right hand side of the road on the brook, down the hill from today's stoplights at Route 14.



Looking down Route 3A heading toward Marshfield with the old mill and factory at the bottom of the hill before the fire. Photo from *Duxbury: A Guide* published by the DRHS.

At the time of its sensational fire, the mill and factory were abandoned and had not been in use for a number of years. The building was owned by the Ford family of Millbrook, who also owned Ford's Store just up the hill. Hattie and Florence Ford were the last surviving members of the Duxbury branch of the family. They were maiden sisters who were local schoolteachers.

Although the factory was a structure ripe for vandalism, it was a sad end to a building that was an icon of past events. The small one-story part of the building had been a fulling mill that predates the larger part of the structure. According to local historian Henry Fish, it was moved from slightly further down the millstream.

The main three-story structure was built shortly after the War of 1812, when the conflict created a shortage of sailcloth. It was built by Ezra Weston and called the Duxbury Woolen and Cotton Manufacturing Company, and was to help supply his firm and the other local ship builders with cloth.

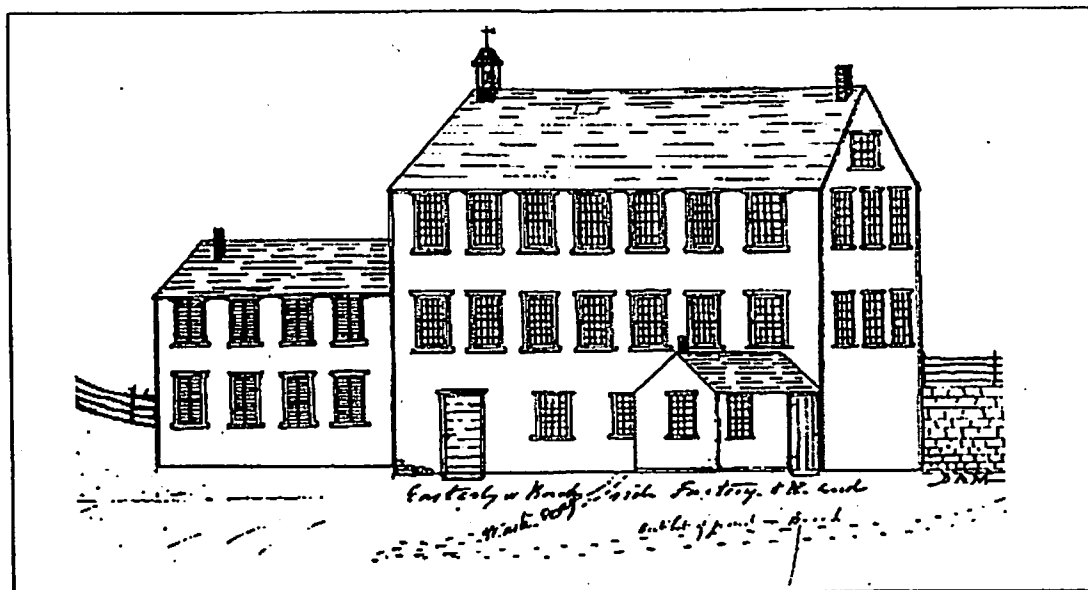
Once cloth began to be made cheaply at larger mills, the Millbrook factory during the ownership of the Fords manufactured yarn, trowels, shoes and tacks. Its last occupation was to grind grain, similar to the original 17th century mill of Millbrook. In the 1860s, the Fords bought the turbine wheel from the Bluefish River bridge tide mill and installed it in their factory. By 1880 grain could be cheaply ground in large quantities and so once again

industrialization spelled the end of the usefulness of the Millbrook factory and mill. As Ford's Store grew more successful, the mill became less so. After the death of Hattie and Florence Ford's father Jonathan in 1879, and the move west of his brother George to start one of the first orange groves in Riverside California, the mill sat empty, an invitation for a memorable and frightening way to celebrate the new century's 4th of July.

It is not a coincidence that a few short weeks after the torching of the factory in Millbrook a special town meeting was held to consider better means of protection against fire "than now exist." It must have been of some urgency, because only a month later, a report was issued with five recommendations.

The first was to have an appointed board of 12 "fire engineers." The second was a "fire committee" that was to be in charge of all the fire equipment scattered around town. The third was a by-law that would require property owners to have a ladder of "suitable length" to reach the roof of their buildings. Fourth was to increase the fire apparatus around town, and fifth was a recommendation that if any part of Duxbury wished for better protection and contributed towards such, then the town would contribute an equal amount.

It took another six years until Duxbury had regular fire engineer reports in the annual town report. But clearly the burning of the old mill and factory in Millbrook set things in motion toward Duxbury having better fire protection and safer 4th of Julys in the years that followed.



A plan of the mill and factory that was torched on July 4th 1900. Photo from *The Duxbury Book 1637-1987* published by the DRHS.